

“Failure Looks Like this Child is Still in Limbo”: Foster Parent Experiences of Failed Pre-adoptive Placements

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Abstract

Pre-adoptive or “waiting” children are those who have a case plan of adoption and/or whose parental rights have been terminated. There are currently over 107,000 pre-adoptive children in the United States, and on average, they have been living in foster care for over three years. A lack of permanency is associated with a milieu of negative consequences while achieving permanent, stable relationships is significant in developing a sense of self and overall, long-term well-being. Failed pre-adoptive placements represent a significant barrier to achieving permanency; however, the phenomenon of failed pre-adoptive placements has been underexplored.

This study uses phenomenology, a philosophical method and study of experience, to explore how pre-adoptive foster parents make meaning of their experiences of failed pre-adoptive placements. Participants fostered at least one pre-adoptive child with the intent, willingness, and/or openness to adopt the child, but the placement did not result in an adoption and the child moved to an alternative placement. The primary research question for this study is “What is the experience of a foster parent who has had a failed pre-adoptive placement?”

Findings from in-depth interviews reveal that pre-adoptive foster parents enter into pre-adoptive placements with multiple motivations and personal expectations. Experiences which do not confirm these expectations often contribute to decisions to end a pre-adoptive placement. Participants are at times motivated by fear and feel compelled to make decisions to end placements on behalf of alternative roles (i.e. biological mother, spouse, neighbor, etc.). Pre-adoptive parents appear to have a future orientation that serves as a guiding force in decisions to continue or end a pre-adoptive placement. Participants describe feelings of grief, loss, and inadequacy. Findings contribute to the body of knowledge and have implications for foster and pre-adoptive training and support and encourage greater understandings within child welfare for improved permanency planning and practice.